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RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON PRIORITY 5237
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI PRIORITY 3489
RUEHNY/AMEMBASSY OSLO PRIORITY 5175
RUEHOT/AMEMBASSY OTTAWA PRIORITY 0055
RUEHSM/AMEMBASSY STOCKHOLM PRIORITY 0710
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO PRIORITY 4290
RUEHCG/AMCONSUL CHENNAI PRIORITY 9655
RUEHB1/AMCONSUL MUMBAI PRIORITY 6949
RUEHON/AMCONSUL TORONTO PRIORITY 0031
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY
RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA PRIORITY 3833
RHHMUNA/HQ USPACOM HONOLULU HI PRIORITY
RUEHBS/USEU BRUSSELS PRIORITY
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SENSITIVE
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DEPARTMENT FOR SCA/INSB
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SUBJECT: PRM PDAS WITTEN EXAMINES IDP ISSUES

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¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: The November 12-16 visit of PRM Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary Samuel Witten came during a critical period in the ongoing humanitarian situation in Sri Lanka. The Government is accelerating releases from closed camps, a move welcomed by the international community but one which also raises a host of complex challenges regarding access and assistance to internally-displaced persons (IDPs) and returnees. Witten discussed with humanitarian agencies and government officials the U.S. decision to redirect aid away from "closed" camps where residents are held without freedom of movement by March 2010. Witten's discussions revealed widespread support among UN agencies and other donors for the U.S. redirection of assistance toward open camps, host families, and returnees. The findings of PDAS Witten's visit reinforced Post views that the U.S. must continue to support the returns process while quietly engaging Government officials on specific serious concerns, including the closed camps and the need for safe and voluntary returns. END SUMMARY.

RETURNS: GOOD ACHIEVEMENT,
FLAWED PROCESS

¶2. (SBU) The Government's "crash" resettlement program began in mid-October. In four weeks, over 100,000 of the more than 280,000 persons initially held in closed camps have been returned to their home districts (most to Jaffna and the East). An additional 25,000 persons have been released to host families since August. The Manik Farm camp population has been reduced from more than 220,000 at its peak to just 130,000 as of November 12. The International Organization for Migration (IOM) plays the largest role in facilitating the Government's returns process, providing logistics support and bus transportation back to district

collection points. Returnees also receive a standard UN-GSL assistance package of cash, food, shelter materials, and agricultural tools intended to provide initial support in areas of return.

¶3. (SBU) Despite these positive steps, PDAS Witten heard from multiple humanitarian agencies about key problems with the returns program. IOM, WFP, and UNHCR generally receive notice about returns movements with only a couple days notice, requiring constant scrambling to put logistics into place for moving thousands of people. Humanitarian personnel in Vavuniya and Colombo reported to PDAS Witten that the Government had returned a small number of persons to areas which were not certified as demined, including two bombed-out schools. In addition to posing a direct threat to returnees' safety, such areas were inaccessible to humanitarian personnel by order of the UN Department of Safety and Security. Moreover, INGOs are currently not permitted by the Government to access Kilinochchi and Mullaitivu area returnees. Some areas of return lacked community infrastructure, including schools, hospitals, and local transportation, raising concerns of whether returns were sustainable. Most UN agencies and national NGOs expressed optimism to PDAS Witten that humanitarian access issues would be sorted out in the near future, while others, particularly INGOs, raised the alarm that the Government was "returning them to nothing." (Comment: When asked directly, no one expressed the view that keeping IDPs in closed camps was preferable to the current situation, despite the flaws in the returns process. END NOTE.)

¶4. (SBU) In a November 16 meeting with PDAS Witten, UN Resident Coordinator Neil Buhne described the difficult

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task of finding a balance in supporting Government efforts to return IDPs, while raising concerns when needed. Buhne noted to PDAS Witten a recent letter he had received from a Government official (Commissioner General of Essential Services), accusing the UN of "sabotaging" the returns process after Buhne temporarily halted IOM transport of IDPs because of safety concerns. Buhne also highlighted UN efforts to urge Government officials to open Manik Farm and other closed IDP camps.

MANIK FARM'S NEAR FUTURE

¶5. (SBU) PDAS Witten and a delegation including USAID Mission Director Cohn visited Manik Farm on November 14. Witten viewed U.S.-funded assistance and talked with camp residents. The delegation found that there is some newfound optimism among camp residents now that significant returns are taking place, but also frustration with the pace of return and the uncertainty about what lies ahead. When asked, all the residents said they wanted to return whether or not there was assistance available in their home villages, and most indicated that they would return to farming as soon as they could. One visitor to the health clinic expressed anger at his continued confinement, noting "they're keeping us here like cattle." Family reunifications within the camps are nearly completed, leaving fewer families to cope with the desperation of not knowing relatives' whereabouts.

¶6. (SBU) On November 13, PDAS Witten met with Brigadier General Ranasinghe (deputy to Competent Authority, Maj Gen-Gunaratne) at SF HQ Wanni. Ranasinghe described the Government's plan to reduce the population in Manik Farm to 100,000 by December 31 through returns and releases, and to 70,000 by January 31, 2010. While caveating that there had been no communications from his chain of command about this issue, Ranasinghe expressed his personal opinion to PDAS Witten that restrictions on freedom of movement in Manik Farm should be lifted after January. Ranasinghe told PDAS Witten that returns were 100 percent-completed to Jaffna.

The remaining population in the closed camps was predominantly from Kilinochchi and Mullaitivu districts, where there had been just 7,000 returns to date. Witten acknowledged the efforts to date to expedite releases and returns, and emphasized the U.S. Government's interest in seeing freedom of movement provided to all civilians.

¶ 17. (SBU) In a November 14 meeting with UNHCR Representative Michael Zwack and Deputy Representative Elizabeth Tan, PDAS Witten received an update on UNHCR's planning for the Manik Farm operation, where UNHCR holds the UN lead for camp management, protection, and shelter activities. Tan expressed optimism that the Government would choose to open the camps in early 2010, particularly given donor messages that funding for closed camps would end soon. UNHCR is prepared to increase its activities in the camps, particularly Zones 0 and 1 where semi-permanent shelters are already established, if the camps were opened. If the camps remained closed, UNHCR indicated it would reduce its activities, such as ending assistance with digging drainage ditches.

CONCLUSION

¶ 18. (SBU) PRM PDAS Sam Witten's visit came as the Government has taken real steps to end prolonged confinement of IDPs. His consultations with Government and

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humanitarian agency officials and with residents of Manik Farm reinforced the USG decision to end support for a prolonged closed-camp situation while buttressing support for the Government's overall returns effort. Embassy finds that there is strong support among INGOs and UN agencies for donors to direct funding in this way. Post will continue to engage directly with the Government on these difficult issues surrounding returns and to identify ways to best support IDPs in host family situations and areas of return.

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